

Town picks up dumping ground

Officials: Foreclosure will allow cleanup

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A piece of property between Old Bridge's Laurence Harbor and Cliffwood Beach sections that is a long-time home to illegal dumping is now the township's responsibility.

Township Administrator Jack Coughlin said Old Bridge, which is owed almost \$500,000 in back taxes on the land, completed foreclosure yesterday on the 62.5-acre property.

The abandoned property, some of which appears to be wetlands, is located off Route 35 and is known locally as Forbes Beach. Township Tax Collector Steve Davis said an

OLD BRIDGE estimated \$380,000 is owed on one of two lots that make up the property, and \$110,000 is owed on the other. The owners have not paid taxes since 1989, he said.

"But this money is basically a moot point, because once we have ownership, we wipe out what is owed," Davis said.

The owners, P.W. Esquire Corp., Matawan, could not be reached for comment yesterday. In 1993 P.W. Esquire purchased the property from Cifelli Associates, also of Matawan, for \$800,000. Old Bridge first put a tax lien on the property in 1990. In 1995, an attorney for the township started the foreclosure process.

Township Attorney William Ruggiero said code inspectors did visit the site when the foreclosure process began. The township would not try to take over land that did not have some value, he said.

"Basically it's not good business sense to acquire property that is environmentally challenged," he said. "But if it's only a question of trash, it might not be such a problem."

Ruggiero said it was too late to send a Department of Environmental Protection inspector in to assess the damage before the foreclosure was completed.

Mayor Barbara Cannon said a township code inspector had visited

the site in December and contacted marine police and DEP about the garbage.

A DEP investigation of the site in 1987 revealed illegal dumping but no toxic health hazards.

Coughlin said the township does not have plans yet for the property.

"Obviously, it will have to be cleaned up now that it's ours," he said, adding, "We didn't observe any imminent danger on the property."

Cannon said there has been discussion about developing part of the land with shops, tying it into an overall waterfront development plan.

"It certainly has potential for the town," Cannon said.

Cifelli Associates cleaned up some of the trash in the late 1980s. But trash has reappeared recently and now includes propane tanks and 55-gallon drums, causing concern for neighbors and firefighters.

Community activist Mary Ann Gurliaccio, who lives in Cliffwood Beach, said she was shocked to learn the township might acquire the property soon. "I'm concerned that this land was not surveyed if we're in the process of foreclosure," she said yesterday. "Where have the code enforcers been? And why wasn't the public notified?"

Gurliaccio was to present the community's concerns about the dumping to the Township Council at last night's meeting.

But Councilman Camillo Vitale, who represents Laurence Harbor and Cliffwood Beach, said yesterday he thought the township's takeover of the property might help stop the illegal dumping.

"Dumping has always been a constant problem. The only way to solve the problem is to put a gate on the upland area, keep an eye on it, or develop it," he said.

With streets, houses and lighting at the site, the dumping would stop, he said.

"If we take it over, it will be easier to regulate," Vitale said.